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ABSTRACT

Education reform mandates that teachers be able to function competently in multicultural classrooms. This paper describes a culturally aware teaching model designed to address the problems and needs of rural at-risk students. The major goal of the model is to empower students through acceptance, understanding, respect, and appreciation of both the self and other cultures. The pedagogically nontraditional model, developmental in nature, stresses a common culture curriculum that includes contributions of Black, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, and religious minorities within the student population. The program integrates social studies and language arts to form a core curriculum and draws heavily from literature as a means of teaching much of the content area. Emphasis is placed not on the textbook, but on creative experiences developed through the unit approach and the use of appropriate literature. To match the unique learning styles and characteristics of rural students, cooperative learning experiences are introduced. This approach enhances the self-worth of rural at-risk students and strengthens the positive correlations between self-concept and school achievement, thus reducing the at-risk factor. (Contains 22 references.) (LL)

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A MULTICULTURAL MODEL FOR RURAL AT-RISK STUDENTS

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A MULTICULTURAL MODEL FOR RURAL AT-RISK STUDENTS

by Gaston Bloodsworth and Doris Fitzgerald

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about multicultural education in teacher training programs and its implementation in public school classrooms since NCATE added its 1979 criterion that preservice teachers be able to function competently in multicultural classrooms. However, we cannot lay claim to successful outcomes in either area. Peter Scales (1992) has provided sobering data obtained through questionnaires from 439 middle school teachers, deans, and chief state school officials. This group reported that they found their teacher preparation had prepared them "inadequately" or "poorly" for several areas of classroom teaching. They rated cultural and language diversity as the area in which they were least adequately prepared. This information, gathered on the heels of the many multicultural education models implemented during the 1980's, points out the lack of success of these models in teacher preparation programs.

Gezi (1981) summarized the five major approaches to multicultural education as:

1. Education for the culturally different, with a focus on helping to equalize educational opportunities for such students
2. Education about cultural differences, with an aim to cultural understanding
3. Education to preserve cultural pluralism
4. Education to help children function in two cultures
5. Education to develop competencies in multiple systems

The authors of this paper believe an effective design for

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addressing the NCATE criterion would be to combine the five approaches and form a unified approach that focuses on the individual or the self. This would assist college and university students and their school pupils to value students from culturally diverse backgrounds, while learning to appreciate the larger human heritage.

One approach to this challange is to use multicultural materials from an integrated Social Studies and Language Arts curriculum. This approach is especially effective as a means of enhancing the self-worth of rural at-risk students. The use of this model will strengthen the positive correlation between self concept and school achievement, thus reducing the at-risk factor for these students.

SELF CONCEPT THEORY

Interest in the self has been evident in American psychology since the beginning of the twentieth century, but it has been the behavior-oriented psychologists who have dominated the field. Rogers (1969) described the self as the central aspect of personality. He and Maslow (1954) both wrote about the tendency toward self-actualization and growth when nurtured by the environmemt. They, with Allport (1955), described life as the art of becoming, the movement toward self-actualization.

Combs and Snygg (1949) provides a strong foundation for developing an understanding of the importance of the self and self concept in the learning process. Since 1960, numerous studies of the relationship between the self concept and academic achievement

have been conducted. Purkey (1970) gives an excellent overview of many of them. He states:

> Although the data does not provide clear-cut evidence about which come first - a positive self concept or academic success, a negative self concept or scholastic failure - it does stress a strong reciprocal relationship and gives us reason to assume that enhancing the self concept is a vital influence in improving academic performance. (p. 27)

There is a natural connection between the individual or the the self and multicultural education. According to Ramsey (1989), the purposes of the multicultural approach are:

> ...to sensitize all individuals toward ethnic and racial differences, and to increase individual awareness of cultural traditions and sociological experiences. It was also to help all individuals understand their race and culture, including language and socialization experiences, had value, and could and should exist on a coequal basis with mainstream American values and experiences. (pp 8,9)

Since the emphasis is on the individual, the self, It is possible to use multicultural materials to foster the development of a positive self concept that will, in turn, promote positive school achievement.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL AT-RISK STUDENTS

Regardless of one's race, gender, or culture, the one factor that has the greatest probability to place a child at-risk of school failure is simply being poor. It is well documented that low socioeconomic levels are closely related to poor academic achievement (Chall and Curtis, 1991). Evidence from most studies indicates that socioeconomic status affects school performance and achievement more than any other variable, including race.

While statistics dealing with the number of children living in poverty vary, all are staggering. The Center for Study of

Social Policy (1991) lists the national average at 26 percent, while Reed and Sautter (1990) found that children accounted for 39.5 percent of the nation's poor.

Contrary to widely held beliefs, poverty is not limited to the inner cities nor does it follow racial boundaries. The majority of poor people still live in small towns and rural areas (Reed and Sautter,). Typically, rural areas have 30 percent of the farm population and 24 percent of the nonfarm population living in poverty (Rodgers and Burge, 1982). Thus the population of rural at-risk students is extremely high, with the majority of unsaved and underserved children living in these areas (Helge, 1988). Without question, poverty and low socioeconomic status have affected the achievement of many rural students.

The home life of the student is another important at-risk factor and it is often related to poverty and socioeconomic class. If the family does not have a background of educational attainment or does not support education, the student has a much greater chance of dropping out (Coleman, 1988). In general, students with poor family relationships and little or no parental involvement in their education are more at-risk (Bull, et al, 1992). Abuse and related dysfunctional factors also play a major role in the child's self concept and academic achievement. Clearly, the more dysfunctional the family becomes, the greater the student becomes at-risk.

Problems at school are yet another multi-faceted factor that is characteristic of the at-risk student and often leads to drop-out. Problems such as retention, conflict, failing too many

classes, competency tests, and the school's lack of tolerance for student diversity in background have been cited by Bull (Bull, et al, 1992). Other studies have found that many of the problems of at-risk students are created by the schools. Grossman (1991) cites numerous examples indicating working class students (lower socioeconomic) receive unfair treatment in school that can create problems for those students. He found they receive less attention and fewer rewards, but more disciplinary actions, often corporal or verbal punishment and suspension. He also found that most of the teachers were not aware of their biases. One has to wonder how much of this is brought about by poorly trained teachers who are in rural classrooms because of state policies of inequities in dealing with rural districts (Bloodsworth, 1993).

Minority students have to deal with the above factors as well as ones that are unique to them as minorities. They may look different due to racial or ethnic features and there is evidence that minority students do not perform or behave in the classroom in the same manner as do their Anglo peers (Hale-Benson, 1986). They may have to adjust to cultural values, language, or teaching styles that are totally alien to them, but must continue to function in their own cultures outside school. They must also deal with the problems of prejudice. This may be racial, cultural, social, or economic, and can take many forms, both subtle and overt. It may well take the form of being academically suspect because as a group minorities will not achieve at the level of their mainstream peers. As a result, they may be labeled low achievers and will not be academically challanged and will fall farther behind and become

more at-risk (Ornstein and Levine, 1989)..

Thus minorities become low achievers and highly at-risk often as a result of the educational system itself. Yet teachers and administrators are often not aware of what they are doing to these students and the students' self-esteem, nor are they aware of the rich cultural heritage the students may possess.

One does not have to look different physically in order to receive the same treatment. Since socioeconomic class is a fairly good predictor of achievement in school, then underclass whites as a group are also low achievers. And they are also minorities. Ornstein and Levine stated "...their problems are often ignored because they are not well organized as a group and are not deemed newsworthy by the media."

In addresssing the highly at-risk multicultural rural populations one must consider the real meaning of multicultural. More often than not, it is thought of in terms of a global world and the exctic differences among cultures, or, more commonly in educational textbooks, as related to minority groups, usually blacks and Hispanics, with only a passing reference to Native Americans and other minorities. Usually it is the poor inner city population that is stressed. Almost always multicultural education is addressed on the urban level. Perhaps this is a major cause for multicultural education programs to be less effective than desired in teacher preparation programs.

Multiculturalism goes far beyond this. The diversity of cultures within rural areas is commonly overlooked. Often there is more diversity within a given rural area than there is between

rural and Urban areas (Pepple 1990). Rural America is not homogeneous and there are many rural minorities that have never received due recognition or have been overlooked. When one considers not only race and ethnic background, but includes socio-economic factors, religion, and specific and unique cultures, we become aware of many groups that have not been properly addressed, yet educators must deal with them and their unique needs on a daily basis. Far too often these students are not only highly at-risk academically, but are also higly at-risk in developing as productive members of society.

The multicultural education approach provides the best opportunity to reach a diverse population. Understanding and appreciating other cultures is the very foundation of multicultural education, yet there is disagreement over how it should be handled. Many believe the goals of the schools should be to teach and preserve the separate identities of the racial and ethnic cultures and not teach a common American culture. Some go so far as to teach contempt for anything white or European (Ravitch, 1991).

Probably the majority of educators believe we should teach our common culture, but include the contributions of other cultures. In a New York survey of educators reported in the American Teacher (1992), 88 percent believed we should teach a common heritage. Blacks and Hispanics showed the strongest preference with 89 percent and 87 percent. Only 70 percent of the whites supported this position.

The authors of this paper believe the most positive approach to using multicultural education is to teach a true common culture

curriculum that includes the contributions of minorities and other cultures, with special attention paid to those in the student population. In so doing, an understanding, appreciation, and respect for other cultures becomes a major goal.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MODEL

In using this approach teachers may have to change their teaching styles. It calls for more interaction among the students and is more global than traditional pedagogy. Rural students are global learners who do not seek individual recognition and they do not like individual competition (Potterfield and Pace, 1992). They also like information to be given to them orally. Clearly, they are not at home in the typical urban or urban influenced classroom, so it is imperative that the teachers adapt their teaching styles to the student's needs.

When properly done, the cooperative learning approach is a natural for rural students. It allows for interaction and hands-on activities in a group setting. Work is within the group and it is the group that receives the recognition. Working together for a common goal brings the students together in a different manner than does individual competion. It is also an excellent means of assisting students who have trouble dealing with time frame situations because of the interaction with and the progress of the group. Also learning becomes a social experience. It also creates a warm and friendly environment that reduces hostility. With a caring teacher and appropriate learning activities, cooperative multicultural education can go a long way toward addressing the

needs of at-risk rural students. It will also enhance the learning of the other students as well as produce citizens who are aware of the worth of each individual in our society.

There is also a need for an integrated approach to teaching. Content information does not exist in a vacuum. There is correlation between and among the information from the various content areas. If any content information is to become relevant to the student, most especially the at-risk student, it must be presented in a manner that will inspire the student to personalize and apply it to his or her daily life. This approach goes well with the strong global learning style of rural students.

With this approach the language arts become the primary tools of communication: reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking, and visioning. From this perspective, social studies becomes the content area and language arts the vehicle for an integrated approach to the teaching and learning processes.

In dealing with specific cultures, the teacher must avoid ethnocentrism and recognize that each culture is an entity that has an intrinsic value of its own. Understanding this, the teacher can now draw from the various cultures as the basis for a multicultural approach to integrated instruction.

Special attention must be given to the individual cultures of the area. Often this will include cultures so specific and unique that their problems may not have been addressed outside the immediate area, and the students who are members may well be among the highly at-risk population. The Travelers of Edgefield and Aiken Counties in South Carolina are excellent examples of this

phenomenon.

There will be other groups who are also minorities, but may not always be thought of as such. These may be large or small groups, almost always white, who possess common factors such as socioeconomic class or culture. A textile or mill village resident of the southeast would be an example.

Rural blacks, while always identified as minorities because they are black, are different from urban blacks. And they need to be dealt with as members of their own culture, not collectively as blacks. There are different rural black cultures and all have made contributions to the overall American culture. The Gullahs of the sea islands of South Carolina are an example of a unique rural black culture.

The Native American population is also a rural minority of many distinct cultures. They vary greatly from the Indian stereotype portrayed in popular literature and media, but they share the common denominator in that they are all highly at-risk.

There are migrant worker children who may be white, black, or Hispanic, and are members of the lowest socioeconomic class. They are also among the highest of the at-risk population, yet they have much to offer in an integrated multicultural approach when their cultures and vast experiences are shared, respected, and appreciated.

There are other rural populations that are also highly at-risk. Hispanics, while depicted primarily as urban in most educational literature, are also rural minorities. Still other cultures, such as Asian ones, especially South East Asian, exist

in certain rural areas.

Then there are the religious minorities. They may be segregated from most other cultures of the area, or semi-integrated into some, and the choice may or may not be theirs. At any rate, a unique and distinct culture emerges that may stress different values, modes of dress, and conduct.

The authors believe the needs of rural at-risk students can be met through this integrated curricum model. Unit teaching, incorporating the use of cooperative learning groups, a positive classroom climate based on tthe development of trust between teachers and students, and an emphasis on the unconditional acceptance of each individual and his or her culture are essential elements of this approach. This viable model recognizes the essence and validity of developmental learning. The development of appropriate, functional language skills related to real life, as well as sufficient communication skills to maintain a role as an active participant in the educational process of the school will empower the student. This empowerment, in turn, is a major contributor to the development of a positive self-concept, enabling the student to combat the sense of powerlessness which has long been acknowledged as a major cause for dropping out of school.

Within the parameters of this unit teaching model, content material from both the social studies curriculum and the language arts curriculum will be blended. Children's and adolescent literature will be used as the natural bridge between the two curriculums. This merger becomes the basic component of the model.

CONCLUSIONS

This multicultural education model is one approach to addressing the problems and needs of the rural at-risk students. The underlying basis of the model is the acceptance, understanding, and appreciation of the individual and his or her culture. This must take place between and among the teacher and the students and is accomplished as the teacher integrates facets of the various cultures into the overall instructional program. Differences, commonalities, explanations of customs and beliefs, and the like can be shared, and as a result understood and appreciated.

The model is developmental in nature and addresses the educational level of the individual. And it is integrated in that the social studies and language arts are brought together to form the core curriculum. But it draws heavily from literature and uses it as a means of teaching much of the content area. It uses the instructional unit as the creative means of bringing everything together. Emphasis is not placed on the textbook, but rather on creative experiences developed through the unit approach and the use of appropriate literature. And to meet the unique needs of rural students, the cooperative learning concept is used.

The resulting learning experiences will enhance the self worth of the rural at-risk students. And with this comes empowerment and a positive self concept that can in turn bring about academic success.

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